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ABSTRACT

Retailing is the largest industry in the United States, employing roughly 18 percent of the total labor force. However, high turnover resulting from low wages in entry-level positions and the perceptions of retail workers that job security is far from certain and that advancement potential is limited have resulted in low levels of employee retention and advancement. Career ladder models that help workers develop sets of highly transferable skills and tie their skill development to increased wages and greater opportunity for advancement may result in benefits to both employers and the workforce. Design principles and guidelines of effective career ladders are as follows: (1) a demand-driven workforce intermediary plays a leadership role; (2) career ladders acknowledge the needs of employers as the central determinant of required skills and training and build relationships among firms and providers of workforce development services; (3) career ladders demonstrate clear pathways entry-level, to intermediate level, to professional within a single firm or through a network of participating employers; and (4) career ladders provide pathways or structures for employers to "grow" or find workers that meet their business needs. (Examples of career ladders in the retail industry are given throughout the document. An appendix contains a scenario for creating a retail industry career ladder. Contains 39 references.) (MO)

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Retention and Advancement In the Retail Industry:
A Career Ladder Approach

Heath J. Prince, Jobs for the Future

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Retention and Advancement in the Retail Industry: A Career Ladder Approach

Preface: Building Skills in Customer Service and Sales

Faced with a rapidly expanding demand for customer-service workers in a wide range of Philadelphia industries, The Reinvestment Fund, through its workforce development initiative and in partnership with the National Retail Federation and Jewish Employment and Vocational Services, created the Customer Service Training Collaborative. CSTC trains new workers and retrains dislocated workers according to recognized and certifiable skills standards in customer service. As a workforce intermediary, it utilizes the Customer Service Skills Standards, developed by the national Sales and Service Voluntary Partnership (and approved by the National Skill Standards Board), to create a training program based on a cross-industry occupational analysis of customer service workers in the Philadelphia area.

Whether in professional services or in entry-level retail occupations, nearly all new net employment growth in the Greater Philadelphia region over the past decade has been in the service sector. As a result of its cross-industry focus on customer service, CSTC can provide workers with the skills to succeed not only in the retail industry but also in customer service positions and careers in banking, hospitality, insurance, health care, transportation, public service, and call centers. The "career ladders"—the series of occupations linked by common skills—made evident by the CSTC curriculum have begun to improve advancement prospects for program participants and to reduce turnover for employers.

With effective career ladder in place, local labor markets function better and are easier to understand, for employers as well as workers. Employers get more access to workers in other occupations who may be developing skills that are in high demand. Workers come to view low-skill, low-wage jobs not as dead ends but as opportunities to increase their skill levels and advance their careers.
career ladder

Career ladders have succeeded largely in those industries and sectors for which labor is in high demand and employers are interested in pursuing new strategies to hire, retain, and, ultimately, advance their workers. Dire labor shortages in the health care industry, demographic shifts in heavy industry, and booming demand for more technologically skilled workers in a variety of industries have contributed to the growth of career ladders.

The retail industry faces its own set of problems, however. High turnover results from relatively low wages in entry-level positions, the sense among retail workers

that job security is far from certain, and the perception that advancement potential is limited. Using a career ladder model has the potential to reverse these perceptions. Career ladders can tie workers' skill development to increased wages and offer them greater opportunity for advancement. By developing a set of highly transferable skills—such as those identified in the Customer Service and Sales Skills Standards—workers are not only more secure in their present jobs but, should that job disappear, better able to find a new job.

Clearly defined career ladders, managed by a workforce intermediary that can train workers in transferable skills, help define a new approach to resolving the retention and advancement problems that have long bedeviled the retail industry. Moreover, human resources polices designed to increase retention—for example, by facilitating worker advancement—can benefit both workers and employers.

Retention and Advancement in the Retail Industry addresses the key elements in creating career ladders, examines what makes career ladders work, and presents their potential benefits to this industry. However, this report is not a rigorous analysis of the retail industry; numerous studies have tilled this ground. Rather, it focuses on two specific issues: retaining and advancing a retail workforce. A companion report, developed by Business for Social Responsibility, highlights the changes that individual firms have made in their human resources practices in order to improve retention and advancement in the retail industry.

In any workforce development practice, the key to achieving long-term results is a keen awareness of the labor market's dual customers: the worker *and* the employer. Thus, in each of the career ladder models examined in this report, employers have benefited when workers have taken advantage of skills training and education leading to advancement along a clearly defined career path. Similarly, a common denominator among the innovative human resource practices in BSR's report is retailers' recognition of the bottom-line benefits deriving from investments in human capital. Similarly,

In neither approach, whether through a career ladder across employers or through the human resource practices of individual firms, are the adopted activities self-evident or without cost. Success has required significant investments—on the part of employers, employees, workforce intermediaries, or the public workforce development system, or some combination of all of these. Nonetheless, in both approaches, investments in human capital have yielded substantial returns for both workers and employers.

Long overdue is a close examination of policies and practices that correct the misperception that the retail industry tolerates turnover as a cost of doing business or that it offers little opportunity for worker advancement. Given the importance of the industry as both an entry point into the labor market for new workers and, increasingly, as one in which more experienced workers make a career, a discussion of what works is merited.

The report is presented in three sections.

- Section I provides a brief overview of the retail industry, including information on its size, its wide variation in occupations, and its relative importance to workers who are new to the labor market.

- Section II highlights the emerging role for workforce intermediaries in the efforts to improve retention and advancement. It distills out key elements, common practices and design principles employed by a number of different career ladder models.

- Second III briefly examines the problems faced by retailers and workers regarding the industry's relatively high turnover rate and its perception as one that offers limited opportunity for advancement. It also highlights the advantages that the industry has with regard to the development of career ladders.

Section I:
Introduction

Retail has long been one of the nation's most dynamic and innovative industries. Intense competition among retailers mandates the adoption of new technologies and requires constant attention to vacillations in the labor market. In terms of total employment, retailing is the largest industry in the United States, employing nearly 22 million workers, or roughly 18 percent of the total labor force. Importantly, because of its relatively low skill requirements, high demand for workers, and flexible job scheduling, retail is a favored industry for workers who are new to the labor market. Approximately 38 percent of all former welfare recipients have entered service-industry occupations since 1996, with 24 percent in retail and wholesale trade.

The health of the industry is also closely related to the health of the economy. Retail sales are an often-cited barometer of national economic well being, with increases signifying improving consumer confidence and economic growth. Retail sales reflected the boom economy of the 1990s, leading to a rapid expansion of retail space, increased concentration of retailers, and greater demand for labor. According to *Monthly Labor Review:*

> Between 1987 and 1997, gross retail sales in constant (1987) dollars increased by 35.4 percent—from $1,541 billion to $2,087 billion. Over the same period, the number of retail establishments grew by only 6.7 percent (from 1.5 million to 1.6 million) and retail employment grew by 16.4 percent (from 20.1 to 23.4 million) (Sieling 2001).

The boom in the industry and its corresponding spike in demand for labor have underscored the need for an examination of policies and practices that improve worker retention and increase the opportunity for worker advancement.

Retail Industry Advantages

Two characteristics associated with the retail industry give it an advantage over other industries that might adopt labor market retention and advancement practices. First, its already large size is projected to increase over the coming decade. Second, skills developed in the industry are valued throughout the labor market. Taken together, these two characteristics lay the groundwork for innovation in the area of labor market retention and advancement strategies.

Growth Projected Across a Wide Range of Retail Industries

Typically, entry-level sales or cashier jobs come to mind when one thinks of work in the retail industry. However, the industry offers a wide range of occupations for workers. In addition to sales, it offers entry-level occupations in departments as

varied as distribution, merchandising and buying, finance and internal auditing, store management, marketing and sales promotion, logistics, information systems, inventory control, and human resources.

In all but one of these occupations (inventory control), growth in employment is projected to be at or considerably above average employment growth in the rest of the economy through 2010. Wide distributions of median earnings reflect the industry's wide range of occupations—from a median wage of $8.50 per hour for retail sales clerks, to salaries of $37,560 per year for merchandising and buying managers and $78,830 for information systems managers (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2002a).

High Degree of Skill Transferability

In 2000, the National Skills Standards Board approved the skills standards in customer service and sales occupations, as developed by the national Sales and Service Voluntary Partnership, under the management of the National Retail Federation. The Customer Service and Sales Skills Standards illustrate the applicability of the work functions and skill needs from retail, wholesale, personal services, and real estate to occupations in a variety of other customer service-related industries, particularly banking, hospitality, insurance, and call centers.

This characteristic of sales- and service-related industry skills is of particular importance to workers who may be new to the labor market. These workers sometimes lack the skills, credentials, and social networks that facilitate advancement, often leading to a sense of being mired in a "dead-end" job that offers the worker little hope for family self-sufficiency. By identifying common skills sets and the degree to which they are valued across a range of industries, Skills Standards and National Certification in Professional Customer Service underscore the potential for entry-level jobs in the retail and related sales and service industries to lead to higher-paying jobs, within these or in other industries.

Retail Industry Challenges

Worker retention and advancement are interrelated problems that frustrate retail workers *and* their employers. Sensitivity to seasonal fluctuations and, to a certain extent, downturns in the economy, often make employment in the industry tenuous for many entry-level workers. For employers, this translates into high turnover and accompanying costs. Similarly, advancement potential for workers is sometimes limited by the industry's intensely competitive nature, translating into difficulties faced by employers in recruiting workers.

Retention

The issue of labor market retention has different implications, depending upon the health of the U.S. economy. In a robust economy, such as the one that characterized the late 1990s, labor markets are tight and workers are scarce. Retention in a tight labor market is primarily a problem for employers, as workers willingly "job-hop" to earn higher wages. In a weak economy, labor markets are generally looser and jobs scarcer. Retention in this context becomes primarily a problem for workers as employers reduce their workforces.

For the retail industry, however, retention problems appear to be relatively constant regardless fluctuations in the overall economy. In May 2001, the labor market was relatively tight: the national unemployment rate was 4.4 percent. In the retail industry, the "quits rate"—the number of quits during the month as a percentage of total employment—was 4.7 percent. This rate contrasted sharply with the national average quits rate of 2.2 percent. By May 2002, the national labor market had loosened considerably, as unemployment rose to 5.8 percent. Nevertheless, the quits rate in retail remained at a relatively high 3.4 percent, still nearly twice the national average of 1.8 percent (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2002b).

Put somewhat differently, the turnover rate—the number of quits as a percentage of the number of hires in a given timeframe—for those same months in 2001 and 2002 were 62 percent and 63 percent, respectively. In contrast, the turnover rate in the rest of the private economy hovered around 46 percent over the same time period.

Clearly, the rate of turnover in the retail industry remains a problem for employers regardless of the overall health of the economy. This problem is compounded by the fact that employers experience difficulty in retaining even their most qualified workers in a tight labor market.

- Cost of poor worker retention

The literature addressing the costs of worker turnover has expanded greatly in recent years, focused on the tremendous expense involved in replacing workers. Estimates of turnover cost range from 70 percent to 150 percent of the workers annual wage. The Greater Louisville Chamber of Commerce has estimated that, on average, its member firms spend just over $22,000 to replace each production worker with wages of $10 per hour.[1]

[1] From the Greater Louisville Chamber of Commerce homepage, www.greaterlouisville.com, accessed May 6, 2002.

In addition to turnover costs, retailers have found costs related to the loss of customer loyalty that results in poor customer service, itself often correlated with inadequate training (Cohen 1998).

Advancement

Limited advancement opportunity relates directly to high turnover at the lower end of the labor market. A recent survey of 3,000 employers in Chicago, Cleveland, Milwaukee, and Los Angeles found lower turnover rates among workers with jobs that had promotion potential (Holzer and Wissoker 2001). This is particularly true in the retail industry: studies have demonstrated that staffing policies that create an internal labor market, by adopting a "promotion from within" policy and offering a degree of intra-organizational mobility, have a positive effect on retail workers' perception of promotion opportunity. "Greater promotion opportunity increases commitment to the organization and results in higher creativity and reduced turnover," note Shankar Ganesan and Barton E. Weitz. "Thus, staffing policies associated with internal labor markets provide organizationally beneficial behaviors" (1999).

However, productivity-enhancing technology in nearly every industry has increased efficiency while also reducing the number of specialized positions—and pathways for advancement—required to operate a competitive business. This is particularly true of the retail industry. Automated inventory assessment tools, bar-code scanners, and cashier-less check-out lines have redefined retail operations from the "Mom and Pop" stores of just a couple of decades ago (Bernhardt 1999a).

Moreover, production methods have been redesigned to accommodate a low-skilled, entry-level workforce, resulting in highly efficient service delivery systems that do not require large investments in skill development. Finally, as in most major industries, competition and a drive for efficiency have caused many retail firms to flatten their occupational hierarchies, creating a pyramidal structure with a very small ratio of managers to non-salaried workers (Sieling et al. 2001).

Each of these changes in operation and production has direct implications for a worker's ability to advance. The industry's ability to recruit and retain a high-quality workforce diminishes as the perception grows that it offers limited advancement potential. While many retailers have distinct occupational charts, leading from cashier to upper management, few retailers provide advancement opportunities for any but the most talented members of their workforce. This limited advancement potential within individual firms leaves many qualified workers with few options other than to look elsewhere for employment, which, in turn, contributes to the turnover costs paid by employers.

Improving Retention and Advancement in the Retail Industry

Labor market success for retail workers occurs in one of two ways: either a worker is promoted within the firm after demonstrating the requisite skills, experience, and competencies, or the worker advances within the broader labor market, either in the retail industry or in another industry that values his or her skills. This report highlights promising practices of workforce intermediaries that help to retain and advance workers by utilizing career ladders models. Some of these models utilize the traditional "within firm" career ladder, linking skills required at one level of employment to jobs in progressively higher-skilled and more remunerative positions within the firm. Other models begin within a single industry and map out advancement routes through a range of industries that require similar skills.

This report also examines the role that intermediary organizations have played in developing advancement routes for workers, as well as the mechanics of the various career ladder models.

Employers who have calculated the value of worker retention to their bottom lines have adopted an array of innovative human resources approaches that have improved worker retention, increased morale on the shop floor, and increased productivity. These approaches are born out of the recognition by a growing number of employers that employee training and worker-friendly HR practices are strategic means for gaining a competitive advantage. Since retail work, at its most basic, requires interaction between frontline staff and customers, HR strategies aimed at improving the skills of these workers is becoming increasingly important.

There is an emerging confluence of concerns between retail industry critics, who hold that the industry is designed in such a way that makes advancement difficult, and industry advocates, who recognize that high turnover rates are a cost that can be reduced, no matter how much they are factored into the costs of doing business. Both camps have begun to acknowledge the need to identify a skills set that will facilitate worker advancement through the labor market:

- For industry critics, commonly accepted skills standards open the door for workers to apply skills acquired in retail to other industries that require similar skills.
- For industry advocates, industry-recognized skills standards broaden the pool of qualified workers from which they can hire.
- For workers, the acquisition of skills that are shared among a range of occupations and industries begins to transform the labor market from a daunting morass of seemingly unrelated, low-wage jobs into a more transparent system of articulated steps toward family self-sufficiency.

By combining the concept of a career ladder with industry-certified skills standards and a workforce intermediary that is familiar with the retail industry, the current perception of the industry as one that is inimical to the needs of its workers is radically changed.

Section II:
Creating Career Ladders

This section distills out key elements, common practices, and design principles employed by a number of different career ladder models. The information is derived from research of both longstanding models and those under development. In all cases, the models have at their core a workforce intermediary that builds upon skill development to meet both the skill needs of employers and the employment needs of workers.

Career ladders can link multiple occupations across a labor market or within a single firm, based on the similarity of the skills developed in each occupation on the ladder. Workforce intermediaries facilitate this linkage by identifying the skills acquired at one level of employment and matching them with the skills required at a higher or complementary level of employment. Workforce intermediaries match workers with employer vacancies, as well as with the support, education, and training services needed to ensure that the match succeeds. A career ladder also facilitates employer access to new and more reliable sources of skilled labor, *and* it serves as a road map that helps workers navigate through the labor market.

Participating employers offering higher wages in skilled positions benefit from a career ladder by getting better access to workers in occupations that require lower levels of similar skills and pay lower wages. And occupations requiring fewer skills and paying lower wages become more attractive to workers when viewed within the context of a career ladder that transforms "dead-end" jobs—jobs to be avoided or left as soon as possible—into stepping stones to better ones. Employers who employ workers with lower skill levels benefit from reduced turnover costs and improved customer service. For workers, a career ladder creates a network of employers cooperating around training and hiring practices. This network provides multiple avenues out of low-skill, low-wage jobs and into family-sustaining, skilled occupations.

Career ladders can involve a wide array of partners, depending on the needs of participating workers and employers. Potential career ladder partners include workforce intermediaries, individual employers, and support service providers, as well as community colleges and training vendors that provide education and training needed for advancement to higher levels of skill and employment. Labor unions and labor management partnerships sometimes help manage career ladders or serve as training providers. Career ladders leverage the core competencies of each of the partners to address regional workforce development needs more efficiently.

The Basic Types of Career Ladder

Career ladders vary in several important ways:

- The numbers of occupations and occupational tiers they include;
- The number of individual career pathways they utilize;
- The numbers of employers and industry sectors they address;
- The source of workers for participation in the career ladder;
- The extent to which employers modify human resource practices;
- The range of workforce development services: recruitment/screening, education/training, and support services; and
- The organization responsible for operating the career ladder.

Most important, career ladders differ in kind. They range from those that focus on advancement within a single firm, to those that focus on advancement among multiple firms within a single industry, to those that cross industries within a single sector, to those that advance workers across multiple sectors of a local labor market.

Each of these variations on the career ladder model has at its core the complementary goals of creating a more transparent labor market—one in which job seekers can easily identify the skill needs of employers at various levels—and making the workforce development system more sensitive to the skill needs of employers. By accomplishing these goals, such models are "win-win"—for employers and for workers seeking to advance in the labor market. In addition to these broader, outcome-oriented similarities, all but the single firm model uses a workforce intermediary that is responsible for managing the flow of information regarding employer skill needs and the community's ability to meet those needs.

Single-Firm Career Ladders

Single-firm career ladders, often referred to as internal career ladders, have been on the decline in recent decades. As firms have sought to create more flexible workforces, they have shed the ancillary occupations, which once served as proving ground for entry-level workers, and focused on their core competencies.

Some businesses have benefited from strengthening their internal career ladders, however. Often through labor-management cooperation, these firms have developed the skills of their entry-level staff, creating candidates qualified for higher-skill vacancies within the firm. These firms target a number of entry-level occupations, develop training curricula for advancement into occupations

requiring higher-level skills, and collaborate with training providers and staff to help ensure that vacancies can be filled through internal promotion. In this relatively simple career ladder, key partners include management, worker representatives, and training and support services providers. Essential to such an arrangement is the firm's commitment to it, either through a union-negotiated contract or as a stated human resources policy. (See boxes on Cape Cod Hospital and Consumer Values Stores)

Cape Cod Hospital, Hyannis, Massachusetts

Created through an agreement between SEIU Local 767 and the management of Cape Cod Hospital, this career ladder program is especially relevant for low-skill people in entry-level jobs. It offers classes for union members in non-professional occupations, such as housekeeper or dietary assistant. The program is also committed to promotion from within, filling 80 percent of all job openings by promotions from lower positions. A lattice of opportunities within the hospital permits workers to move from department to department and across occupational groups, affording even greater opportunities for advancement.

The Cape Cod program is designed to make continuing education as easy as possible. Courses are offered between shifts—meaning that employees can quit one hour early or start one hour later to take a class offered on site. Thus, the hospital and the employee each donate an hour to continuing education. This benefit is only available for courses offered on site, which are basic education classes. Workers pay a $25 fee for each course, which the hospital refunds upon completion of the course.[2]

Consumer Value Stores, Washington, DC

Consumer Value Stores has created a Regional Learning Center in collaboration with a One-Stop Career Center in Washington, DC. The center offers training at several steps along a career pathway leading from entry-level to higher-paying jobs. People initially hired as pharmacy assistants can enter a training program to become pharmacy technicians, and then become eligible for promotion, after additional training, to lead pharmacy technician. CVS continues to pay participants' wages during their training time. The costs of the program are shared by employer and public, welfare-to-work funds.

Single-Industry Career Ladders

Some career ladders train workers to fill similar occupations in multiple firms in a single industry. These career ladders connect a pool of workers trained for relatively skilled, entry-level occupations in participating firms. Participating firms often aggregate their training funds, and they also collaborate to develop curricula that prepare workers for essentially similar occupations in any of the firms. More sophisticated versions of this type of career ladder target not only entry-level workers but also incumbent workers and transitional workers.

As with some single-firm career ladders, those that operate across firms within a single industry may be aided by strong labor-management cooperation. The

[2] Author interview with Joyce Hamblin, Secretary-Treasurer, SEIU Local 767 and Co-Chair, Career Ladder Committee, Cape Cod Healthcare, June 2002.

agreements that emerge from their cooperation serve as indicators of the importance of career ladders to both employers and workers in these industries.

Key participants in single-industry career ladders are firms, worker representatives, employer intermediary organizations, and training and support service providers. As in single-firm career ladders, agreements among firms regarding hiring and training practices are typically very important, as are agreements between firms and other partners. (See box on District 1199c's Training and Upgrading Fund.)

The Greater Cleveland Growth Association's Career Ladder in Health Care

The Greater Cleveland Growth Association (GCGA), the nation's largest Chamber of Commerce, has partnered with the Center for Health Affairs, an industry association, to create a career ladder in health care, which is a major employer and sector in need of skilled workers in the region.

University Hospitals and the Cleveland Clinic have begun active work toward implementing their career ladder. In addition, a third health care facility, Metrohealth, is working closely with Cuyahoga Community College, GCGA's community college partner, to develop curricula for nursing classes provided on site.

Within long-term care, Menorah Nursing Facility, a partnering employer in Cleveland's career ladder, has committed 50 percent of the time of its Director of Education (a Registered Nurse who holds a Master's degree) to career ladder activities. Currently, three steps of the career ladder are operating at Menorah, while additional steps are under development.

- Menorah conducts a three-week long pre-employment training program.
- Menorah hires successful completers as Certified Nursing Assistants and pays them $8.79 per hour.
- Certified Nursing Assistants have the opportunity to participate in a series of training courses where they can advance their job skills. Workers are eligible to participate in training for a higher level after three months of service at the previous level. The current steps advance Certified Nursing Assistants to Clinical Technicians I (CTI), then to Clinical Technicians II (CTII). Courses are administered on site, and workers receive one hour per week of release time to participate. Workers advance to a new title and pay level upon completing each level.

As of late 2002, 33 Menorah employees had completed training for CTI, a 12-week course. Employees completing the course received a $.50 increase in wages, to $9.61 per hour (plus benefits). Thirteen Menorah employees had completed CTII and have received a $.50 increase, to $10.11 per hour (plus benefits). All of the CTI and CTII completers participated in the pre-employment training. Menorah paid for the pre-employment training and that, plus paid release time, represented an investment of nearly $6,000 plus benefits.

GCGA and its partners have drafted a course outline to train to rise to CTIII. At that level, health care workers can meet all the criteria to sit for the nurse entrance test, the industry entrance exam for Licensed Practical Nursing (LPN) school. It will also provide a platform for employees with a variety of lower-level hospital jobs to meet all the criteria to enter training for technologist or technician jobs, such as pharmacy technician. In addition, a curriculum has been drafted for a part-time LPN course, to make it possible for CTIII graduates to become LPNs while working. Cleveland's Central School of Practical Nursing developed the curriculum in collaboration with the other partners in the Skill Supply Chain initiative.

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Menorah Nursing Facility has agreed to provide release time for employees to participate in CTIII and LPN courses. University Hospital has decided that the CTIII course will ready its lower-level employees for training in LPN, technologist, and technician positions.[3]

District 1199c's Training and Upgrading Fund

The Training and Upgrading Fund is an example of a comprehensive approach within a single industry. Service Employees' International Union 1199C, Philadelphia's largest local health care union, has created career ladders for incumbent health care workers through the fund, established in 1974. Its resources come from the contributions of 61 employers. The fund's training center serves union members and community residents at all skill levels represented by the union. The fund's nurse training program offers a career ladder for disadvantaged workers in low-paying health careers. Trainees can advance from Certified Nursing Assistant to Licensed Practical Nurse to Registered Nurse. In a two-year period, the program trained 458 nurses aides, 76 LPNs, and 113 RNs, exceeding enrollment goals by 200 percent. The fund's training center makes training available to incumbent workers by offering classes 14 hours a day, 7 days a week.[4]

Sector-Based Career Ladders

Sector-based career ladders target specific occupations or sets of occupations in a group of related industries, with skills-training courses then designed to prepare entry-level workers for employment in those occupations. Rather than focusing solely on meeting employer demands for skilled labor, many sector-based career ladders also seek to create system-wide change in a labor market by addressing both its demand and supply sides.

Sector-based career ladders expand the boundaries within which a worker can advance to include multiple industries in a single sector. They identify skills that are shared across a range of occupations within these industries, and they work to both expand an employer's pool of recruitable workers and to increase the advancement potential for workers.

Sector-based programs often satisfy employer concerns by providing technical assistance to firms, linking firms to new markets, assisting firms in establishing skills standards for an industry, and encouraging firms to adopt model human resource practices. Through these demand-side activities, sector-based programs utilize their industry contacts to create employment opportunities and "job ladders" for workers in low-skill, entry-level positions.

Sector-based career ladders also satisfy the needs of job seekers and incumbent workers. Most sector-based career ladders rely heavily on customized training

[3] Author interviews with George Coulter, Director of Employment and Training, Greater Cleveland Growth Association, 1999-2002.

[4] Author interviews with Cheryl Feldman, Director, District 1199c's Training and Upgrading Fund, Philadelphia, PA, April 2002.

programs that are specific to the occupations or industry sectors on which they focus. In addition, most sector-based career ladders provide some degree of pre-employment training in basic work skills. One-Stop Career Centers, community-based organizations, community colleges, and, increasingly, unions are providing this pre-employment training. Some of these career ladders have been created to permit a high range of mobility among occupations within an industry sector. These career ladders utilize skills certificates that are generally recognized and accepted by participating employers, facilitating worker advancement to higher levels of employment.

Key participants in sector-based career ladders are employers, training and support-service providers, worker representatives, and intermediary organizations that intervene in the labor market on behalf of both workers and employers. Agreements about sector-based career ladders are typically among employers, intermediaries, and training providers, and deal with worker placement and customized training curricula. (See box on Shoreline Community College.)

Shoreline Community College, Seattle, Washington

Shoreline Community College has created career ladders to meet the needs of a wide range of employers. TANF recipients and other low-income individuals can enroll in college programs that include access to these chains. Several of the programs are sector-specific (such as information technology), while others are occupational in focus and serve employers in a variety of sectors.

Shoreline's Information Tech Career Pathway begins with pre-employment training that prepares new workers for entry-level work. From there, workers receive data technician training, general office training, or Microsoft Office applications training that allows them to move into a variety of occupations across several industries within the IT sector. Beyond these initial rungs in Shoreline's Career Pathway, workers can receive training for occupations that require higher skills and offer increased pay and improved advancement opportunities.[5]

Cross-Sector Career Ladders

At a certain level of employment and skill development, career ladder models can cross industry sectors. These models recognize that basic work-readiness skills are valued across industry sectors, and that worker transfer across these sectors benefits both participating employers seeking workers with higher skills and workers seeking to gain skills and increase their income as they advance.

However, as workers move up beyond the initial tiers in the career ladder, cross-sector mobility diminishes as the skills required for further advancement become more specialized to given industries. Thus, cross-sector career ladders often focus on entry-level employment, and a referral source for new workers is essential. These referral sources can be public agencies, job-training programs, and school-to-work programs, to name a few. Also essential to this model is an

[5] Author interviews with Joe Renouard, Executive Director, Office of Shoreline Community College, 2000-2002.

organizing entity responsible for placing workers in vacancies in participating firms, monitoring workers advancement up the career ladder, and recruiting new workers and firms. (See box on Educational Data Systems, Inc.)

Educational Data Systems, Inc., Philadelphia

Greater Philadelphia Works, Philadelphia's Welfare-to-Work program, employed a "tiered employment" model, developed and administered by Educational Data Systems, Inc. EDSI's career ladder advanced workers from entry-level occupations that required little skill and paid low wages into positions, across a range of industries, with employers requiring greater skill levels and paying higher wages.

Key elements of the tiered employment model included:

- Negotiating a defined set of expectations among a group of employers regarding setting a standard for hiring and promoting entry-level workers;
- Creating a "new worker protocol" that communicates advancement opportunities and expectations to participants;
- Training staff on how to counsel participants regarding opportunities offered by the tiered employment model; and
- Establishing internal controls to track the progress of participants through higher tiers of employment within prescribed timeframes.

EDSI's career ladder model involved over 200 employers in Greater Philadelphia and increased one-year retention rates to an average of 59 percent. This model is currently being replicated in Baltimore.[6]

Design Principles and Guidelines of Effective Career Ladders

Career ladders that are operated by demand-led workforce intermediaries generally conform to four specific design principles:

Design Principle: A demand-driven workforce intermediary plays a leadership role.

- A demand-driven workforce intermediary provides leadership. Given the importance of incorporating employers' skill specifications and demand for skilled labor in the design of career ladders, it is essential that demand-led workforce intermediaries provide leadership and oversight of career ladder development and operation. For example, the intermediary brings about employers' agreements to participate in the career ladder. At minimum, this role for workforce intermediaries means supervising the career ladder partnership and its overall operations.

- A workforce intermediary either manages or selects a credible organization to manage the career ladder and facilitate the relationships among its partners. The level of involvement that a workforce intermediary may want to assume is

[6] Author interview with Ray Eibel, Educational Data Systems, Inc., August 2001.

determined in part by an assessment of its own capacity for managing the career ladder. In some cases, it may be necessary or preferable to contract or partner with an organization that has responsibility for the day-to-day operations of the career ladder.

- A workforce intermediary maintains up-to-date information on employer skill needs. To the extent possible, the intermediary compiles, analyzes, and reports upon employers' skill needs without revealing proprietary information.

- A workforce intermediary leads the partners in either collaborating on delivering services or integrating service delivery. Agreements must be crafted on the support services and training needs that will be met by the career ladder. This applies when developing either a simple career ladder with few partners or a complex career ladder involving partners from a variety a community-based organizations, public agencies, employers, community colleges, or unions. Workforce intermediaries situate themselves to ensure that the services and training offered by the career ladder are best suited to meet the needs of both workers and employers.

Design Principle: Career ladders acknowledge the needs of employers as the central determinant of required skills and training and build relationships among firms and providers of workforce development services.

- The career ladder is demand-driven and responsive to employer workforce development needs. To gain and sustain employers as its customers, a career ladder should represent a cost-effective method for meeting employers workforce needs, with specific attention paid to quality, cycle time, ease of use, and cost.

- Skills are developed to meet employer-defined specifications. The emphasis placed on meeting specific skill standards, as defined by participating employers, represents both the primary advantage and the primary objective of a career ladder. This requires employers to identify their skill needs. It also requires workforce intermediaries to compile skill needs without revealing proprietary information.

Design Principle: Career ladders demonstrate clear pathways—entry-level, to intermediate level, to professional—within a single firm or through a network of participating employers.

- Competency outcomes are identified and certified. General agreement among career ladder partners should be reached regarding the achievement of specific competencies required for advancement.

- Strategies and systems are effective in promoting retention and advancement, making it possible for those who begin with few skills to move

up. From a workers perspective, a career ladder should be a clear route into and up through a labor market. As such, the career ladder builds progressively upon the skills and competencies acquired at each level of employment. This will require the workforce intermediary to be equally concerned with workers new to the career ladder and incumbent workers seeking advancement.

- Training and support services are appropriate to the population served. Career ladders serve dual clients in the labor market: employers and workers. Many of the workers who will benefit from career ladders will come to the job with a variety of barriers to job retention and advancement. The training and support services offered as part of the career ladder should meet the needs of a working population that may require significant assistance with transportation, child care, and "soft skills" training, to name a few possibilities.

Design Principle: Career ladders provide pathways or structures for employers to "grow" or find workers that meet their business needs.

- Occupations with a range of skill levels are part of the career ladder. A career ladder most effectively serves its dual customers by providing links in a wide range of occupations and skill levels. Employers will benefit from wider access to workers in industries and occupations not normally considered for recruitment. Workers will benefit from the avenues out of the traditional "dead-end" jobs provided by the career ladder's links to higher-paying occupations in a range of industries.

Career Ladder Stages of Development

Effective career ladder models are shaped by the skill needs of a labor market and the capacity of that labor market's institutions to create, sustain, and grow it. Initiatives should produce clear benefits for the employers, workers, and job seekers who participate in the career ladder. Effective career ladders have as their primary goal achieving high-quality implementation in a timeframe that meets expectations, based on the resources that are likely to be available. Approaches are typically developmental, starting simply and adding components as resources and interest allow.

Of the career ladder models studied by Jobs for the Future, a standard process for creating and operating career ladders that match qualified workers with high-demand occupations typically follows three stages of development.

- Assessment and planning;
- Partnership building and program development; and
- Operation and sustainability/expansion.

Assessment and Planning

- A workforce intermediary assesses its capacity and willingness to undertake the development and leadership of a career ladder.

Can the organization play a role in career ladder development? What core competencies and experience in workforce development can it build upon? Are resources available, or can they be raised? Will the organization's leadership support the initiative?

- Target industries and occupations for inclusion in the career ladder are identified.

Which occupations will be easiest to build into career ladders, given the regional economy and labor market? What skills are most in demand, and for which occupations, and will these skills and occupations continue to be in demand for the foreseeable future? Among the occupations, which require similar skills, moving from less well-developed skills to more well-developed skills?

- Assess employer demand for an alternative method of getting trained workers.

Do local employers need an alternative source of qualified workers? How well does the workforce development system meet their labor needs?

- Assess community's ability to support a career ladder.

Are there adequate training, education, and pre- and post-employment support service providers to meet the needs of career ladder participants? Do the providers have a demand-driven approach, or are they interested in adopting one? Do they want to become more effective and efficient? How will education and training services that build skills in the occupations that compose the career ladder be developed, if these services don't already exist? What portable credentials, especially those based on industry standards, can program operators use to measure the skills developed through education/training? What support services do individuals need in order to participate in any recruitment/screening activities that may be part of the career ladder, work successfully in career ladder occupations, and learn effectively in education/training.

- Identify lead employers in target industries to determine their willingness to assist with the development of a career ladder.

Which employers are interested in participating initially? These may be companies with the most pressing needs, or ones whose business model is to benefit from gaining first-mover advantage. Is it possible to build a career ladder based on the occupations of their workers? Is it possible or necessary to build more than one career ladder? Which employers are more likely to participate

after the program has a track record of successful operation and has gained the advantage of the learning that an early follower derives?

- Identify potential financial support for the career ladder, including public funds, private contributions, fees-for-service, and foundation options.

Are public funds available to support training, education, placement, and post-employment support functions? Are local charitable foundations or philanthropic organizations willing to support the career ladder initiative? What is the appetite among local employers for fee-for-service training and placement programs?

- Identify goals for the career ladder.

Do the occupations it is important to address fit within one career ladder or more than one? That is, do the occupations all require the development of similar skills, or do differing groups of occupations require the development of different skill sets? To what extent do occupations potentially forming the career ladder build the skills and provide the credentials necessary to prepare workers to be candidates for each succeeding occupational tier? Can articulated steps in skill acquisition and occupations that meet the needs of the career ladder's dual customers be identified? Would restructuring occupations to build needed skills be in the interests of employers and workers? How many career ladders do you want to develop at first? In the long run?

Partnership Building and Program Development

- Workforce intermediary or career ladder operator obtains employer support.

Identify a core group of employers who would be willing to engage in the career ladder development process.

- Expand core group of employers to include a wider range of employers in the targeted industries.

Approach employers in targeted industries and industry sectors to recruit them to career ladder participation. What skills are easily identified as common, entry-level skills across a range of occupations?

- Identify skill requirements at multiple stages of employment among targeted industries and employers.

What are the skill requirements for different stages of employment, from entry-level jobs to those requiring an Associate's degree or an advanced certificate? Solicit input from participating employers on skill specifications for multiple tiers of employment. Solicit assistance from partnering employers, community colleges, and training providers with developing curricula to meet skills specifications.

- Expand group of partners to include providers of training, education, and employment support services.

What partners can provide the education, training, and support services necessary to build the career ladders? Identify the missing services and then recruit providers to the career ladder.

- Agree upon roles and responsibilities for all partners.

What organization should manage the career ladder initiative? What organization should staff its development and operation?

- Identify trainers and funding sources for training workers to meet the specified skill requirements.

Where will individuals come from to fill the skill needs of the occupations in the career ladder? Will they come from companies that have poor opportunities for promotion, high turnover, and large numbers of workers with low skills and little work experience? From recruitment/screening agencies (e.g., One-Stops, staffing firms, workforce development service providers, TANF agencies)? From providers of education and training? From all of these sources? Is funding for training available on the job or within the community?

- Establish hiring agreements among employers to facilitate hiring and promotion within the career ladder.

Which employers will agree to sign a Memorandum of Agreement or Understanding to demonstrate commitment to the career ladder? Which employers will agree to fill job vacancies with workers participating in the career ladder? Which employers will agree to common criteria for promoting career ladder workers?

- Determine the method is determined by which worker advancement along career ladders will be monitored.

Who among the career ladder partners will be responsible for tracking the progress of participants and ensuring that support services are provided throughout their advancement?

- Incorporate a continuous improvement process into the career ladder.

Develop a process and assign responsibility for incorporating adjustments and improvements into the career ladder.

- Develop a marketing strategy.

Prepare a strategy for keeping potential partners and funders informed of successes.

Operation, Sustainability, and Expansion

- Match new workers with appropriate training providers or partnering employers.

How will entry-level vacancies identified by partnering employers be filled with career ladder workers? Will pre-employment training be required?

- Match entry-level workers with training providers or partnering employers who have vacancies at higher levels of employment.

Are vacancies in occupations requiring more advanced skills being filled by entry-level workers from elsewhere in the career ladder? Are employers with vacancies in skilled positions recruiting from within the career ladder?

- Match skilled incumbent workers with training providers or partnering employers who have vacancies in complementary or higher levels of employment.

Does the career ladder provide access to adequate training and education services for skilled incumbent workers who wish to move into higher paying positions?

- Monitor placements.

Are career ladder participants receiving available retention and advancement services? Are participants proactively utilizing the career ladder for their career advancement? Are participating employers satisfied with those workers hired through the career ladder?

Funding the Development of a Career Ladder

Funding for career ladders can come from a variety of sources. Some receive public workforce development and training funding. For example, the Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership used state and federal training funds as seed money to build partnerships among the public, private, and non-profit sectors to unite the workforce needs of employers with the employment and training needs of workers and communities.

Others use state funds for pre-employment training, tuition assistance, and workforce development program redesign by leveraging in-kind contributions from community colleges. In Washington State, Shoreline Community College has developed career ladders in four occupational clusters: manufacturing, customer relations, health services, and information technology. Similar to the WRTP, Shoreline's career ladder initiative was launched with funding from the state Department of Social and Health Services.

Some career ladders are funded through pooled training resources from participating firms. Trade associations have contributed to funding the development of industry-specific career ladders. As career ladders develop into a recognized and valued tool for labor sourcing, program operators may be able to price their services and charge fees. The Holyoke Chamber of Commerce in Massachusetts has led efforts to build a cross-firm career ladder in the paper manufacturing and conversion industries. It began with one occupational tier and has expanded to encompass several tiers. The chamber has led the development of a consortium of paper manufacturers and paper converters, who have collaborated around developing a common curriculum for the machine operators' position.

Section III:
The Potential Role of Career Ladders in the Retail Industry

Employers have consistently ranked recruiting and retaining a qualified workforce as two of their top priorities. As noted above, retailers' demand for a qualified workforce remains high, regardless of downturns in the economy. At the same time, poorly skilled workers struggle to find avenues out of occupations that hold little opportunity for advancement, and into those that will pay a family-sustaining wage and offer upward mobility.

The traditional ways that workers have developed careers have weakened dramatically in recent decades. To remain competitive, employers have shed many of the ancillary occupations that they had used as a "proving ground" for new workers. Internal career ladders that extend down to entry-level workers are largely gone. In many cases, specialized firms now perform occupations that once offered potential for skill development and advancement, eliminating the rungs between the entry level and occupations that offer greater opportunities for advancement.

Career ladders provide an alternative to these traditional methods for workers to develop skills and careers. A career ladder centers on a clear progression of occupations that build on skills acquired at a lower level of employment in order to meet the skill needs of an occupation at a higher level of employment. Career ladders, which can operate either within a firm or within the broader labor market, promote skill development and worker advancement through a network of recruitment pathways for workers. Career ladders link the multiple skill levels in a given labor market, transferring skills across a range of occupations. Employers' need for labor pulls low-income individuals up from low-wage jobs through the advancement and recruitment pathways created by the career ladder.

As workers advance through a career ladder, each successive job adds to their skills and readiness for higher levels of work. Built around employers' skill requirements, the career ladder aligns skill development on and off the job with those requirements, and it provides employers who have jobs to fill with a work-centered mechanism to vet the qualifications of applicants. This can reduce employers' risk of hiring unqualified workers, reduce turnover, and increase overall productivity.

The linchpin holding a good career ladder together is a strong workforce intermediary that can link workers with vacancies that share similar skills throughout a given labor market. Workforce intermediaries—third-party organizations that involve themselves in the employer/worker relationship in order to improve the functioning of the labor market—have increased in number over the past several years, and increasingly function as organizing entities in the development and implementation of career ladders. The public workforce development system's shift in orientation toward rapid attachment of workers to

the labor market has increased the need for intermediary organizations that can both speak employers' language and effectively interact with the job seekers and workers.

Advantage: Skills Standards Recognized by the Retail Industry

The work of matching skills across seemingly dissimilar occupations is difficult—terminology, job functions, and specialized skills all differ from occupation to occupation. However, the success of any career ladder depends on its ability to translate these differences in skill requirements in a way that is meaningful to all parties involved, and particularly to employers.

Program developers and policymakers have identified customer service and sales skills as a skills set that provides basic "foundational" skills that workers need to succeed in entry-level jobs across a wide range of industries. Several career ladders have been implemented that build on these skills and link them to jobs in the industry.

In developing career leaders, the recent creation of national Customer Service and Sales Skills Standards affords retail with a significant advantage over most other industries with regard to the development of a career ladder. Essential to the success of any career ladder is the reliable and accurate communication of both the skills acquired by the worker and the skills required by the employer. If the employer can be certain that the skills workers bring to the job are those that are most needed, the prospects for retention and advancement are greatly improved.

Equipping workers with skills valued in a range of industries also can be viewed as a counter-cyclical employment strategy from the point of view of job seekers. Workers are less vulnerable to downturns in specific industries once they are trained skills that make them potentially employable across a number of industries.

The National Skills Standards Board (NSSB) designated the Service and Sales Skills Voluntary Partnership (S&SVP), and identified the skills utilized in the Retail Industry (as well as the wholesale, personal service and real estate industries). By ranking the skills according to the degree to which a particular skill is needed and the importance that a skill holds with regard to a particular set of "critical work functions," the NSSB and the S&SVP have created a powerful tool for educators, industry trainers, and workforce intermediaries. Workforce intermediaries can now facilitate the creation of career ladders that extend upward both within the retail industry and throughout the labor market into a wide range of occupations. This level of detail provided on skills has permitted workforce intermediaries such as the Customer Service Training Collaborative in Philadelphia to develop curricula that are specific to the needs of local employers in a range of related industries.

Companies can use nationally recognized, industry-based skill standards and occupational certifications to clearly communicate their knowledge and skill performance requirements, throughout their firms and to the whole labor market. And by reliably determining applicant and incumbent worker knowledge and skill proficiency levels, employers may potentially reduce their costs and risks when hiring and promoting. Workers also benefit from clear delineations of employer knowledge and skill performance requirements. Job applicants can better prepare for different types of work.

Workers and workforce intermediaries can use the nationally recognized, industry-based skill customer service and sales skills standards and occupational certifications to effectively map out career ladders, with improved confidence regarding the related expectations, costs, and payoffs at each key point along the way. For example, skills standards permit workers and workforce intermediaries to evaluate education and training programs against occupational requirements. With a certificate attesting to their skill attainment, workers can communicate their knowledge and skill proficiency levels in terms that employers will readily understand, accept, and value, thereby expanding their long-term employability, employment prospects, and earnings potential.

Advantage: Workforce Intermediaries in the Retail Industry

The growing body of research into workforce intermediaries provides policymakers and practitioners with a good deal of useful information that is, increasingly, being applied to the development of career ladders. Another advantage that the retail industry has over other industries is the proliferation of industry-based, or occupationally related, workforce intermediaries.

Whatever organization serves as a workforce intermediary, it typically performs five core functions in a career ladder:

- *Identify the range of occupations to be included in the career ladder:* This provides a sense of potential career ladders for workers at a variety of skill levels.
- *Identify the skills required to succeed in the targeted occupations:* The skills identified are, most importantly, those that help workers to succeed and those that are transferable across a range of occupations.
- *Identify the demand for the targeted occupations in a local labor market:* Some estimate has to be made of the demand for skills in the local labor market. This helps to determine the types and levels of training that will need to be provided to move workers up the career ladder.

- *Certify skill development:* For skills to be transferable among a range of jobs, they must be certified in a way that is recognized by employers who want to hire from among the career ladder participants.

- *Develop and manage the relationship among career ladder partners:* The most important, and perhaps most difficult, function of an intermediary in a career ladder model is managing the relationship among partners, such as training providers, community-based organizations, and public agencies, and the flow of workers through the career ladder. Without commitment from employers and participation by workers, the model falls apart.

Retail Industry Intermediaries

Workforce intermediaries focused on the retail industry are increasing in number as the industry's importance for new workers grows. The National Retail Federation has spearheaded efforts to develop and launch a number of Retail Skills Centers. These centers, typically based in shopping malls, serve as employment clearinghouses for job seekers and employers and as training centers for new and incumbent workers. In other words, they already act as workforce intermediaries by involving themselves in the employer/worker relationship to improve the functioning of the labor market.

Many retail intermediaries also already have employer relationships and involve employers in designing curricula, internships, mentors, etc. Some of these retail industry intermediaries have even begun to use their relationships with employers and their knowledge of industry-related skills to construct career ladders for industry workers.

The descriptions below highlight the activities of a variety of retail industry and customer service workforce intermediaries and their efforts to recruit, retain, and sometimes advance workers through the labor market.

Santa Cruz Goodwill, California

In its capacity as a training provider for workers who have difficulties entering the labor market through traditional routes, the Santa Cruz Goodwill serves as a workforce intermediary between local retailers and workers interested in pursuing a retail career. Its eight- to twelve-week training program is designed for individuals interested in working with the public in a customer service capacity in a retail store. Practical training takes place at various Goodwill Stores in Santa Cruz and Monterey Counties. The program then refers graduates to open positions with a range of local employers, including Target, Costco, and Gottchucks.

The curriculum covers computerized cash register operations, check-cashing and credit-card-verification procedures, stocking and inventory rotation, visual merchandising, and customer-service and sales techniques, as well as opening

and closing procedures. it also includes training in soft skills, designed to reduce turnover and increase worker productivity.[7]

Arundel Mills Retail Skills Center, Glen Burnie, Maryland

The Mills Corporation launched its third Retail Skills Center at Arundel Mills Mall in Glen Burnie, Maryland, which has been branded MATCH—Mills Access to Training and Career Help. MATCH is an inventive program that provides people with access to training and that targets students, the elderly, the disabled, people on public assistance, and other individuals who may be returning to the workforce. Participants can apply for jobs and build careers at Arundel Mills. The concept is for people to gain portable skills that they can take with them as they move forward in a career, not just get a job. MATCH participants gain the knowledge and abilities necessary to become the skilled workforce that is needed by Arundel Mills merchants. Arundel Mills worked with Anne Arundel Community College and the National Retail Federation to develop a 5,000-square-foot Sales and Service Training Center. The program includes:

- Curriculum and training programs focused on customer service, communication, and sales, incorporating national skills standards recognized by employers in the industry;
- Job training and career advancement classes; and
- Transportation assistance.[8]

King of Prussia Retail Skills Center, Pennsylvania

Created by the National Retail Federation (NRF) and operated by Jewish Employment and Vocational Service, the Retail Skills Center (RSC) recruits, trains, and places people in jobs at the King of Prussia Mall and the surrounding area.

The RSC's interactive workshops and personalized training programs are based on the national Customer Service and Sales standards and local staffing needs. The program covers such areas as sales, customer service, inventory, and store appearance. The RSC also provides school-to-career programs, job fairs, National Professional Customer Service Certification, and advanced-level training programs for current retail workers.

Serving Philadelphia, Montgomery, Chester, and Delaware counties, the RSC's services are available to anyone seeking to work in the retail, sales and service

[7] Author interview with Kathleen McBurney, Goodwill Industries Retail Occupation Coordinator, October 2001.

[8] Author site visit to Arundel Mills Retail Skills Center, Glen Burnie, Maryland, April 2001

industry. Assistance in managing child care, transportation, and other issues is included in the program.

The "core" retail-training program is free to all students. Fees for other training (e.g., customized courses, field trips, national certification) are based upon class or group size and services delivered.[9]

NOVA Workforce Investment Board, California: www.Careerladders.org

Begun in 1997, Career Ladders is a collaborative effort of the David and Lucile Packard Foundation and various workforce intermediaries, including NOVA and four other Workforce Investment Boards within Monterey, San Mateo, Santa Clara, and Santa Cruz counties.

The NOVA WIB, through its online Career Ladders resource, serves as a workforce intermediary by providing clear, accessible labor market information to low-income families and counselors and agencies charged with assisting them. The project increases opportunities for self-sufficiency by illustrating, and helping workers along, career ladders that extend from entry-level positions to self-sustaining occupations.

The career ladders model is used by numerous employment and workforce development professionals, education and training providers, job seekers, and other labor market stakeholders. It is flexible: information can be customized to the regional needs and demographics of the specific community.

One of the many career ladders that the San Mateo County WIB operates is its Retail Sales Career Ladder. This program provides funding for and information on skills training in multiple occupations in the retail industry, as well as wage information, skills requirements, and estimations of the experience required for each occupational level.[10]

Customer Service Training Collaborative, Philadelphia

The Reinvestment Fund, a Philadelphia-based workforce intermediary, and its workforce initiative, the Regional Workforce Partnership, in partnership with NRF and the Jewish Employment and Vocational Services (JEVS) have developed the Customer Service Training Collaborative. The CSTC has incorporated the following key principles in the design of its training program:

- *Leadership by Employers:* The training must be designed and supported by employers. Of particular interest are firms that exhibit the best

[9] Author site visit to King of Prussia Retail Skills Center, King of Prussia, Pennsylvania, August 2001

[10] See www.careerladders.org.

customer-service practices, as well as firms from a variety of industry sectors.

- *Cross Cutting Industry Needs:* The training program meets the customer-service needs of many sectors, not just a few firms. This reinforces the similarity in customer-service skill needs across industries. Nine local companies involved their frontline and supervisory workers to establish and review curriculum standards.

- *Competency-Based Curriculum:* The core curriculum used by the CSTC: starts with critical workplace success skills, particularly clear communication and service mentality; introduces opportunities for customized training to meet specific employer needs; and is based on reaching key competencies based on standards, not on completing certain hours of training.

- *Valuable Credential:* Graduates from CSTC are sought-after workers and also command a wage premium over non-CSTC participants. In addition, the graduates can test for national Professional Customer Service Certification, useful with a wide variety of companies and employers.

- *Replication:* The intention of this initiative is to encourage workforce policy leaders and other training providers to recognize the importance of using industry standards and implement their training curriculum accordingly.

- *Economic Development Impact:* The program should act as an economic development tool by attracting attention from firms looking to fill new job openings caused by expansion or relocation.[11]

Improving the Labor Market for the Retail Industry

JFF's research has found that certain key elements are common to successful career ladder initiatives. First, workforce intermediaries play the leading role in forming the requisite partnerships for career ladders. Second, a "demand-side, pull" approach to moving workers forward is essential to a career ladder. Whether a career ladder is directly led by employers, or simply designed to be highly responsive to the needs of employers, its activities are driven by skill needs of the local labor market, as expressed by participating employers. Third, workers benefit from transferable skills—those that make it possible to move from one company to another, within or across industries and economic sectors. The ability to advance and recruit workers within a career ladder is predicated on

[11] Author interviews with Fred Dedrick, President, Regional Workforce Partnership, Philadelphia, PA, October-November 2002.

the fact that certain skill sets are valued in occupations included in the career ladder.

The combination of certified skills standards and effective demand-driven intermediaries provides a strong framework for creating retail industry-based career ladders. Most of the workforce intermediaries cited here already perform some of the necessary functions for operating a career ladder: they solicit employer input regarding their labor and skill needs; they train and place workers; and some connect workers with support services needed to succeed in the job. While there are few career ladders in retail that facilitate the advancement of all of the industry's qualified workers, the practices of workforce intermediaries such as The Reinvestment Fund in Philadelphia, Arundel Mills Retail Skills Center, and others described in this report certainly point in promising directions.

Developing the skills of the entry-level workforce is essential to the health of the national economy. However, in a budgetary climate in which public funding for skills training is coming under increasing pressure, efficient, cost-effective, and creative methods for developing skills that allow workers to advance become an imperative. JFF's national review of career ladders, knowledge supply chains, job ladders, tiered employment, and similar programs has identified several common elements for planning, developing, and operating career ladders based in the retail industry. Career ladders have the potential to include occupations with limited advancement potential in a group of occupations that, collectively, form the rungs of a ladder to family-sustaining careers.

Appendix
Scenario for Creating a Retail Industry Career Ladder

It can be a daunting task to create career ladders out of the myriad occupations and skills that a person gains in the retail industry. Matching workers with vacancies, identifying advancement pathways through the labor market, and providing employers with a trained and reliable workforce are among the stumbling blocks encountered by numerous well-intentioned initiatives. Fortunately, progress toward simplifying the process of advancing workers based on skill acquisition has been made and is publicly available.

The steps outlined below, abstracted from recent research papers on the topic of developing career ladders, represent only one of many different approaches to creating career ladders (Chicago Federation of Labor and Center for Labor and Community Research 2001, Nathan 2002, Warren 2000). Each paper is premised on the idea that particular sets of skills are required for a range of occupations, and that a hierarchy of skills and corresponding occupations, when linked together in a career ladder, begins to map skill-based routes through a labor market. These steps have been illustrated with current labor market data taken from the sources cited to demonstrate how a retail industry-based career ladder could be created in the Austin-San Marcos Labor Market Area. These steps are for the purposes of illustration only. *Note: The assumptions on potential career ladders should be checked in the field with actual employers who can corroborate the abstracted data gathered from the sources cited below.*

Using Internet-Based Tools for Creating a Career Ladder

Determine the geographic region for analysis: Some estimate of the geographic scope of the career ladder is needed as a preliminary step to its development. To obtain industry and employment information, the Census Bureau and the Bureau of Labor Statistics use Metropolitan Statistical Areas, among other geographic measures. However, an intermediary that chooses to develop a career ladder may decide that a region defined by easy access to public transportation may be of more use to potential career ladder participants. Alternately, the political boundaries used to determine the disbursement of public services and funding for job training may serve for determining the career ladder's geographic scope. Whatever method is used, some geographic boundaries must be determined in order to conduct the subsequent steps in developing a career ladder.

Identify the industry or industries from which workers will advance: Within the specified region, select the industry or industries that will provide the occupations to be included in the career ladder. As described in this report, the retail industry's use of a skill set that is core to a range of industries makes it a useful industry in which to ground a career ladder. At the core of the NSSB's

Customer Service and Sales Skills Standards are the customer service and sales skills applicable to the hospitality, finance, real estate, and personal service industries. A career ladder based in the retail industry should also consider extending to occupations in these related industries.

Determine the numbers of establishments and workers in selected industry/ies and subsectors: The Census Bureau's Economic Census for Metropolitan Areas provides information, by North American Industry Classification (NAIC) codes, on the number of establishments and workers in a given industry in a given metropolitan area. This provides a workforce intermediary, or other career ladder developer, with an estimated of the size of the industry/ies selected for the career ladder. When selecting industries and subsectors in which to develop career ladders, the primary consideration should be the ability of the industry to employ career ladder participants, as reflected by its size and projected growth rates.

Identify occupations in selected subsectors: The rungs of the career ladder are formed from the occupations in the selected industry subsectors. Based on the three-digit NAIC code for the selected industry subsectors, estimate the occupations that might be included in the selected subsector. For example, when developing its Pathways to Livable Wage Jobs report, the Indiana Economic Development Council worked with the state's Labor Management Information Service to determine which occupations were included in each of the state's industries. Alternately, the BLS' National Industry-Specific Occupational Employment and Wage Estimates, by three digit NAIC codes, can be used to identify the range of occupations included in a given industry subsector.

Each industry subsector will employ workers in a range of occupations. These occupations, in turn, are assigned a Standard Occupational Classification code (e.g., retail salespersons, SOC 41-2031). These codes can then be used in a variety of databases, including the Metropolitan Area Occupational Employment and Wage Estimates. This BLS database provides statistics, by MSA, on the number of workers employed in each occupation, as well as the mean and median wages for those occupations.[12]

By combining BLS' National Industry-Specific Occupational Employment and Wage Estimates and its Metropolitan Area Occupational Employment and Wage Estimates with the Census Bureau's Economic Census for Metropolitan Areas, a career ladder developer can begin to identify the industries that should be included, the occupations that will form the ladder rungs, the number of people

[12] The database is divided by Standard Industrial Classification, the predecessor system to the NAIC. Changes were made in some industry classifications when the transition was made from the SIC system to the NAIC system. Therefore, some interpretation is required when using the National Industry-Specific Occupational Employment and Wage Estimates to identify specific industry occupations. BLS provides a "bridge" tool on its Web site that permits translation between NAIC and SIC codes.

employed in those occupations, and the mean occupational wages in a given geographic area.

Establish criteria for narrowing occupations in the career ladder: After the range of potential career ladder occupations is determined, develop criteria for selecting those occupations to be included. These criteria may include specific wage ranges, growth potential, availability of benefits, and educational or training requirements. The criteria selected for a career ladder will vary according to the population to be served and goals to be met.

Wage: The Metropolitan Area Occupational Employment and Wage Estimates produced by the Census Bureau provide mean wages for each occupation in a given metropolitan area.

Growth potential: The BLS' *Occupational Outlook Handbook* provides occupational growth projections, by SOC code. These estimates are based on national data, however. Projections for state or local areas can be obtained by most state Labor Market Information offices. Strong growth potential implies a high demand for labor in these occupations and, therefore, an increased likelihood that career ladder participants will find family-sustaining employment. Only jobs with relatively strong growth potential should be included in the career ladder.

Availability of benefits: While the *Occupational Outlook Handbook* provides limited information on the availability of benefits, more productive sources for this information are state and local Chambers of Commerce or industry associations.

Educational or training requirements: The Department of Labor's Occupational Information Network (O*Net) categorizes, by SOC code, occupations into five Job Zones, ranging from occupations that require little or no work experience and less than a high school education, to those that may require years of experience and up to a Ph.D. [13] A Job Zone is a group of occupations that are similar in these ways: how most people get into the work, how much overall experience people need to do the work, how much education people need to do the work, and how much on-the-job training people need to do the work.

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[13] O*NET OnLine was created for the general public-to provide broad access to the O*NET database of occupational information. The O*NET database includes information on skills, abilities, knowledge, work activities, and interests associated with occupations. This information can be used to facilitate career exploration, vocational counseling, and a variety of human resources functions, such as developing job orders and position descriptions and aligning training with current workplace needs. Information in O*NET is available for over 950 occupations. Each occupational title and code is based on the most current version (1999) of the Standard Occupational Classification system.

Verify occupations and skills with employers. In addition to using BLS data to select occupations for inclusion in a career ladder, verify with the local employers who will benefit from the career ladder that these occupations are ones that are difficult for them to fill. Have employers confirm that the skills to be developed through the career ladder are appropriate for the occupations to be included. Expand or contract your list of skills and occupations as necessary, based on local employer demand.[14]

Create career ladders based on Job Zones: Once the occupations that will compose the career ladder are selected, O*Net's Job Zone classification can be used to link occupations that require relatively few skills to those that require progressively higher skills, pay higher wages, and offer opportunities for advancement. Among the selected occupations, links can be drawn between Job Zone 1 and Job Zone 2 occupations that are in high demand. As workers move up the career ladder, and into occupations that require higher levels of skill than can be acquired through work experience alone, career ladders should provide links to appropriate training and education programs.

Developing curricula to link career ladder occupations: Workforce intermediaries or career ladder developers may select occupations for their career ladders that require training beyond that which can be acquired on the job. In this case, curricula may need to be developed that build on the skills acquired at one level of employment in order to allow workers to advance. The National Skills Standards Board, with the help of the Sales and Service Voluntary Partnership, has created the Customer Service and Sales Skills Standards ("Skills Standards") for the purpose of developing curricula that are based on skills typically found in the retail industry.

To date, several workforce intermediaries have used the skills standards to create curricula used for training workers in pre-employment programs, sales associate positions, and management positions. Moreover, in the case of the Retail Skills Center at the Jersey Gardens Mall in Elizabeth, New Jersey, outreach to local businesses and community-based organizations characterized the skills standards as the basis for a set of portable skills that translate across industries. The acquisition of these portable skills ensure that the skills developed through curricula based on the skills standards could be applied to other industries, including finance and hospitality.

Except for the Customer Service and Sales Skills Standards, the tools cited in this description are free and publicly available through the Internet. The census

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[14] While this step may occur earlier in the process, some degree of understanding of the local labor market is beneficial before workforce intermediaries approach employers to recruit them to the initiative. Knowledge of the labor market and of employers' skill needs lends credibility to an initiative in the early stages of its development.

data are from the 1997 Census, and so may slightly understate the wage data and overstate the total employment data.

Using the Tools to create a Retail-Based Career Ladder

A workforce intermediary planning to develop a retail industry-based career ladder in the Austin-San Marcos, Texas, Metropolitan Statistical Area might begin by examining the industry information provided by the Census Bureau's Economic Census and the Bureau of Labor Statistics to determine the size of the retail industry. In addition, the workforce intermediary would use these databases to select and determine the size of additional industries in which the career ladder might operate.

For example, a workforce intermediary may decide that, for local retail workers, the greatest opportunity for mobility in the labor market is offered by those industries that require customer service skills similar to those developed in retail. In addition, the workforce intermediary may determine that there is a high demand locally for occupations in entry-level patient care and administrative positions in the health care industry, and that some of those require little training or experience but offer greater opportunities for advancement.

The *Economic Census* states that, in the Austin-San Marcos MSA, there are 4,157 retail trade (NAIC code 44-45) establishments, employing 60,049 workers. There are also 1,842 financial services (NAIC code 52) establishments in the MSA, employing 26,497 workers; 215 nursing and personal care facilities (NAIC 623), employing 8,249 workers; and 52 hotels with more than 25 guestrooms (NAIC 7211101), employing 4,972 workers.

Within these industries and industry subsectors (i.e., nursing and personal care facilities and large hotels), a wide range of occupations could be considered for inclusion in the career ladder. A workforce intermediary may want to target those occupations in which there are the closest matches in skill requirements to those developed in retail.

By using the NAIC (or the corresponding SIC) codes for retail, finance, large hotels, and nursing and personal care facilities, the workforce intermediary can identify the range of occupations included in each of these industry subsectors by cross-walking the NAIC (or SIC) codes with the Bureau of Labor Statistics' National Industry-Specific Occupational Employment and Wage Estimates.

Occupations are classified according to Standard Occupational Classification codes. For this example, we can assume that the workforce intermediary chooses the following occupations for each of the targeted industry subsectors:

Retail

Sales Associate	(SOC[15] 41-2031)
Counter Clerk	(SOC 41-2021)
Cashier	(SOC 41-2011)
Manager	(SOC 41-1011)

Finance

Tellers	(SOC 43-3071)
File Clerks	(SOC 43-4071)
Cust. Svc. Reps.	(SOC 43-4051)
Loan Counselors	(SOC 13-2071)

Nursing and Personal Care facilities

Nurses Aides	(SOC 31-1012)
Medical Asst.	(SOC 31-9092)
Medical Transcript.	(SOC 31-9094)

Large Hotels

Food prep workers	(SOC 35-2021)
Desk clerks	(SOC 43-4081)
Maids	(SOC 37-2012)
Managers	(SOC 11-9081)
Landscape Mgrs	(SOC 37-1012)

These occupations were selected for the purposes of illustration only. A workforce intermediary using this methodology for developing a career ladder should base the selection of occupations on local knowledge, labor market research, and extensive consultation with local employers.

After the workforce intermediary has identified the SOC codes for the selected occupations, it may then use the Bureau of Labor Statistics Metropolitan Area Occupational Employment and Wage Estimates to determine the size of the selected industries, the number employed in the targeted occupations, as well as the mean wages for each occupation (see table below).

The intermediary could also use the SOC codes for the selected occupations to determine their (national) projected growth rates in the Bureau of Labor Statistics' *Occupational Outlook Handbook* (see table). This information can be corroborated with the state's Labor Market Information agency.

Finally, the SOC codes can be used to determine the relative skill requirements of the selected occupations through the Department of Labor's O*Net Job Zone categories (see table).

[15] SOC = Standard Occupational Classification code

As with the occupations, current and anticipated skill requirements should be confirmed with local employers who will benefit from the career ladder.

Retail	Mean Wage	Number Employed	Projected Growth	Job Zone
Sales Assoc. (41-2031)	$23,170	21,560	12%	2
Counter Clerk (41-2021)	$19,400	1,540	15%	1
Cashiers (41-2011)	$16,870	15,610	14%	1
Managers (41-1011)	$30,600	6,450	6%	3
Finance	**Mean Wage**	**Number Employed**	**Projected Growth**	**Job Zone**
Tellers (43-3071)	$20,450	1,910	<1%	2
File Clerks (43-4071)	$20,980	1,380	6%	1
CS Reps. (43-4051)	$24,920	16,260	27%	2
Loan Counsel (13-2071)	$23,250	160	15%	4
Nursing and Personal Care Facilities	**Mean Wage**	**Number Employed**	**Projected Growth**	**Job Zone**
Nurses Aides (31-1012)	$18,760	4,670	27%	2
Medical Asst (31-9092)	$23,900	1,630	36%	3
Med. Transcrip. (31-9094)	$26,480	160	27%	3
Large Hotels	**Mean Wage**	**Number Employed**	**Projected Growth**	**Job Zone**
Food Prep. (35-2021)	$16,240	2,770	20%	1
Desk Clerk (43-4081)	$17,200	750	34%	2
Maids (37-2012)	$16,850	4,820	25%	1
Managers (11-9081)	$33,510	120	7%	3
Landscp. Mgr. (37-1012)	$26,520	360	27%	3

Once a list of occupations has been identified, the workforce intermediary may decide to eliminate certain occupations from consideration, based on criteria that may include wage levels, projected growth of the occupation, benefit levels, and Job Zone levels.

For this example, the Austin workforce intermediary will eliminate only those occupations in its list for which there is a projected growth rate of less than 10 percent, except for retail managers. This reduces the list of occupations by three, eliminating tellers, file clerks, and hotel managers.

From among the remaining occupations, the Austin intermediary can begin constructing career ladders that are grounded in retail and extend to three other industries. Moreover, the inclusion of nursing and personal care permits retail workers who gain additional training to move into entry-level occupations in the relatively high-paying health care industry.

A potential career ladder, based on the selected occupations in this example, could begin with a position as a counter clerk (Job Zone 1), advance to a sales associate (Job Zone 2), and then to a customer-service representative (Job Zone 2) in the relatively higher-paying finance industry.

Another potential career ladder could begin with a cashier's position (Job Zone 1), advance to hotel desk clerk (Job Zone 2), and then, with some additional vocational training, to landscaping manager (Job Zone 3) at a large hotel.

A third career ladder could begin with a position as a counter clerk (Job Zone 1), advance to sales clerk (Job Zone 2), and then, after completion of a 1 year certificate program, to a medical transcriptionist position (Job Zone 2) that offers higher wages and allows entry into the health care industry.

A fourth career ladder could be constructed entirely within Austin's retail industry, beginning with a cashier position, advancing to a sales associate position, and then to a retail manager position (Job Zone 3).

Each of these hypothetical examples is based on actual data, and in each case entry-level workers with few skills and little experience could, over time, advance to higher-paying positions in relatively high-demand occupations. As workers advance past Job Zone 2 positions, the increasingly need industry-specific training, including postsecondary degrees. More ambitious career ladders would need to take this into account by partnering with education and training providers.

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